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RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 5567
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 1424
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 3237
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 1398
RUEHPB/AMEMBASSY PORT MORESBY 4069
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 5082
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 3223
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2680
RUEHHK/AMCONSUL HONG KONG 3077
RUEHPT/AMCONSUL PERTH 1249
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SUBJECT: MUSLIM CLERIC'S "MARRIAGE" TO MINOR SPARKS
CONTROVERSY

JAKARTA 00002038 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (U) This message is Sensitive but Unclassified -- Please handle accordingly.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: A Muslim cleric is under investigation for marrying a 12-year old girl last August. In reaction to a public outcry by child welfare advocates, several well-known Muslim leaders have denounced the cleric's action. The unrepentant cleric appears to have, prima facie, violated several child protection laws and could face prison if charged and convicted. The shocking case will hopefully raise public awareness re Indonesia's ongoing problem in trafficking in young women and girls. END SUMMARY.

A SHOCKING CASE

¶3. (SBU) An unusual, shocking case has sparked an outcry in Indonesia. Muslim cleric Pujiyanto Cahyo Widiyanto, also known as "Syech Puji," faces possible charges of having illegal sex with a minor and violating the 1974 marriage law for his wedding to a 12-year old girl in Semarang, Central Java, in August. The cleric, who claims he did nothing wrong, may have violated up to six laws related to child protection, marriage, health, labor and welfare. The investigation is continuing.

¶4. (SBU) The unrepentant cleric, who runs an Islamic boarding school, allegedly intends to marry up to seven girls, two in the immediate future aged nine and seven. He claims he is emulating Islamic Prophet Muhammad. Details of the case have been daily fodder in the news media. According to press reports, Puji's current wife staged a contest and chose the 12-year old girl from among 20 "contestants." The girl's parents have admitted that they agreed to the marriage in order to alleviate financial difficulties. Although it was not registered with the state, they also felt the marriage was legal under religious law. The 1974 Indonesian marriage law states that a woman must be 16 to marry legally.

SPARKING A STRONG REACTION

¶5. (SBU) Child protection groups quickly reacted to the press reports. The Network for Women and Children in Semarang, an NGO, said the marriage constituted exploitation of a minor and urged the police to investigate the case. Indonesia's independent Child Protection Commission (KPAI) immediately sent a team to Semarang to investigate. Hadi Supeno of KPAI told us he feared others would allow their children to marry the cleric, as he has many followers, which would ultimately victimize more children. Liberal Indonesians have underscored that the investigation needs to continue and that the GOI should charge the cleric, while child protection agencies take care of the victim.

¶6. (SBU) Interestingly, after liberal Indonesians led the initial charge, several Muslim leaders have subsequently condemned the "marriage." The following Muslim leaders--including key members of the important Indonesian Council of Clerics (MUI)--made strong statements:

--MUI leader Umar Shihab said "Men should marry adults, there are a lot of other prospective brides around. Why did he marry a 12 year old..the poor girl?" he said.

--MUI Chair Amidhan Shaberah said, "A legal marriage is carried out when the female is at least 16 years old and the male at least 18, in accordance with the marriage law of ¶1974. This marriage is illegal, both according to Indonesian and religious law," he said.

--Minister of Religious Affairs Maftuh Basyuni issued a statement saying that the marriage violated Indonesian law

JAKARTA 00002038 002.2 OF 002

and urging law enforcement authorities to act quickly on the case.

-- Member of Parliament Zulkieflimansyah from the Islamic-oriented Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) condemned Puji's action, telling us it was against the law and inconsistent with Islamic values.

HIGHLIGHTING TRAFFICKING PROBLEM

¶7. (SBU) Muslim leaders have stepped to the plate and made strong statements. We have urged a contact in the MUI to urge that organization as a body to condemn the cleric's action. Though the Puji case has its unique aspects to be sure, hopefully it can bring further attention to Indonesia's problem in trafficking in young women and girls. (Note: It is not uncommon in Indonesia for men to marry young women in order to get around trafficking in persons laws. Additionally, foreign Muslim men sometimes come to Indonesia and engage in contract marriages, paying up to USD 20,000 for a short-term marriage to a young women, for example.)

HUME